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Discover Your Strength - III

Your strengths are the corner stones you use to build your career and there are proven ways that help one to discover that hidden treasure – writes M R Chandramowly

A coach of a Chinese table tennis team who long held the Olympics gold medal was asked by a reporter, 'Tell us about your team's daily training regime'.

'We practice eight hours a day perfecting our strengths.' 'Could you be a little more specific?'

Here is our philosophy: If you develop your strengths to the maximum, the strength becomes so great it overwhelms the weaknesses. Our willing player, you see, plays only his forehand. Even though he cannot play backhand which his competitors are aware of, his forehand is so invincible that it cannot be beaten' – This is the strength theory in a nutshell as presented by Donald O Clifton of Gallup Group. How can one discover strength? Is there a process?

Shashank's name appeared in the list. He was all excited about the MBA campus selection, walking ahead of his mates in interview scores and GD. A year after he joined 'Topsofteck' as a management trainee he was confirmed as Sr. Engineer – Systems.

As time elapsed he found a career block. He could not move further and stayed on in the same position year after year. Frustrated and disheartened, Shashank got stressed up over his lifeless working state. His performance feedback indicated very low ratings. He was not displaying competencies that are required by his position. He had a good academic record, people liked him as a person and still he did not succeed. Standing in the crossroads of career path, he did not know what to do and where to go.

Steps to 'self-discovery'

Prashanth, who is a Sr. Vice-President, also a family friend of Shashank came to his rescue. He had several one-on-one with Shashank and finally put him on to a self-discovery path to find out what he likes and what he does best.

Shashank, as a last endeavor, agreed to follow the process. As a first step Shashank listed out his individual feedback providers who knew him well. Two from his family; his elder sister and his brother-in-law, two friends, one from MBA and one from engineering, two executives from his own department, one from HR and four others.

Feedback from sources

With the help of Prashant, he prepared a simple one-page feedback form and mailed that to his selected feedback providers with a request to share their perceptions about him. The raters were requested to name the strengths they have perceived in him along with supportive examples of specific action / moments, weaknesses or the areas where there is scope for improvement. To make it easier to process and to ensure accurate feedback, he requested the raters to mail their feedback directly to Prashanth who would summarise the feedback.

There was a good response and almost 90 per cent sent in their feedback and Prashanth passed on the summary to Shashank. Looking at the feedback, Shashank was deeply moved by the strong points that were attributed to him, which he was not in the know of. Few of the areas, which he thought were his weaknesses, did not appear at all in that list. Where as some areas under the title ‘opportunities for improvement’ was identified as strengths in his self rating. He had more strength than he knew.

Pointers from feedback

Shashank, as guided by Prashanth drew out a common observation from all the responses including his own self-rating, and categorised the items under appropriate groups. He looked only at the uniformity of the message on his strong points as perceived by most of the raters.

The comments from his family members were similar to those of his college buddies and work colleagues.

Everyone highlighted Shashank’s courage, adaptability and perseverance. Shashank realised that even a small and unconscious behaviour had made a huge impact on others.

A self-portrait

Shashank was then guided to describe the five areas identified as his strength and started designing his self-portrait to make it a good psychological and cognitive profile. He looked at it. The profile reflected all his previous achievements and suggested a possible portrait of the future. Scripting a portrait takes in some effort to identify strong areas, He wrote “I am at my best when I

firmly stand on my values and logic which makes others to understand the importance of what I am doing. I can work intensely and untiringly with passion to the work…" Looking at his portrait he felt extremely confident and happy.

Now he knew why he failed to perform his work as Manager—Hardware. His strengths of teamwork, courage or communication did not find a place in routine system maintenance. Having located his strength areas Shashank re-wrote his job script to build on what he is good at. He had to make a better job fit between his work and his best self.

He made some changes in his working style and team interaction. He began scheduling meetings with system designers and engineers who had trouble in getting information between their groups and maintenance teams. He brainstormed with teams to find better ways to prevent problems with new products. Products that were saddled which maintenance issues stared moving fast, free from snags. His ability to collaborate across functions and his open appreciation to a job done well were noticed and in less than nine months his hard work paid off. He was promoted as Program Manager. (Story is partly based on inspiration of Gallup Research – HBR – Jan 2005)

I know of an R&D manager who shared with me about his enormous joy of working and he is never tired even after working for ten hours a day.

He is happy as an individual contributor. He did not accept a lucrative offer, which could have paid him a better compensation stating that a major part of the offered job involved sales and marketing activities.

Reflecting back on my own career, I decided to leave an IT organisation where my performance was measured based only on the recruitment and retention numbers.

While I enjoy recruitment and retention related work, I was not prepared to focus only on that. I enjoyed building HR systems and in helping people to identify competencies to add value to business. I had to discover my way. Sooner I found that satisfaction and rewards are not always good relatives and I chose the former.

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